The great Eastern promise

Title: The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift Of Global Power To The East
Author: Kishore Mahbubani
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THE role of culture in fuelling economic growth sparked a debate over Asian values in the 1980s. The debate peaked in a shrill bout of Asian triumphalism before it was silenced by the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s.

Westerners and those Asians who had scorned the economic claims made on behalf of Asian values declared themselves vindicated by the sight of Asians humbled by the market.

As a senior Singapore diplomat then, Professor Kishore Mahbubani was one of the most articulate and vigorous participants in the Asian values debate. In this latest book, which is as combative as his earlier writings, he goes beyond the terms of that debate to offer several exciting ideas in the wake of Asia’s remarkable recovery from the 1997-1998 financial crisis.

Mahbubani argues that power is shifting to the East, not because Asian societies are rediscovering "some hidden or forgotten strength of Asian civilisation", but because they are building on "the pillars of Western wisdom" that have enabled the West to outperform Asian societies in the past two centuries.

The dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy identifies seven such pillars: free-market economics; science and technology; meritocracy, pragmatism; the "culture of peace" among Western states since the end of World War II; the rule of law; and the "virtues of Western education." The question that arises immediately is this: If emerging Asian powerhouses such as China and India are succeeding in embracing Western wisdom, why should global power be shifting from the West to the East?

Mahbubani replies controversially that the West has entered a period of insecurity in which it is forgetting what made it succeed. Meanwhile, it is Asia that has inherited Western wisdom as the foundation of its success now and in the foreseeable future.

Prof Mahbubani declares: "We have reached the end of the era of Western domination of world history. Although the West will remain the single strongest civilisation for decades more, the world will witness "an enormous renaissance of Asian societies."

ROSY OUTLOOK: A poster monitoring share prices in Shanghai as China enjoys strong economic growth. In defending Beijing's credentials for world leadership, Prof Mahbubani criticises Western critics of China who, being obsessed with human rights and democracy, forget how long it took their own societies to get to where they are today.

These critics are ideologically incapable of understanding "how happy most Chinese are with their current condition", he says. Though it is true that China must move towards democracy eventually, at the moment the Chinese people "have never been freer".

The book also warns against moves to exclude China from global governance on the grounds that only a community of democracies can run the world.

The US is the "strongest candidate" for the position of global leader because it has "done more good for the world than any other country has", particularly since the end of World War II, he says. However, he suspects that the US today is far less confident than it was in 1945 and remarks that "the gap between it and the world has never been wider".

Europe's problem is that it has been unable to extend its "benign influence" outside its borders. This leaves China and India as two front-line Asian states at a transitional time in world history.

In a stout defence of Beijing's credentials for leadership, Prof Mahbubani criticises Western critics of China who, being obsessed with human rights and democracy, forget how long it took their own societies to get to where they are today.

The writer, a former Straits Times journalist, is a visiting research fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.